

We must end literacy inequality

Why are some districts progressing and others lagging in literacy?

The importance of literacy as a driver of individual and social development cannot be stressed enough. Bangladesh has long struggled to eradicate the scourge of illiteracy which, despite its moderate economic success, has proved harder to fix. There have been encouraging gains in recent years, however, with the 2022 population census showing a 22.89 percent increase in the national literacy rate since the 2011 census. But one persistent offshoot of the problem has been inequality in literacy, with some districts falling so far behind others that it can easily derail the government's plan to achieve 100 percent literacy by 2030.

According to the recent census, the literacy rates in Jamalpur, Sherpur, Bandarban, Sunamganj and Kurigram are significantly lower than the national average. While the national average is 74.66 percent, the average in Jamalpur is 61.52 percent, Sherpur 63.57 percent, Bandarban 63.64 percent, Sunamganj 64.77 percent, and Kurigram 64.99 percent. At the other end of the spectrum is Dhaka division, which, unsurprisingly, has the highest literacy rate, at 78.09 percent. While other pockets of literacy inequality do exist – such as between urban and rural populations, or between male and female populations – these districts present a unique challenge for the policymakers.

Poverty remains the biggest barrier to education. But poverty alone cannot explain their poor literacy rates, as districts with fewer resources have performed better than some of these districts. This means that barrier to literacy attainment can – and does – come from other factors, such as lack of awareness, educational support and adult literacy projects, as officials at the Bureau of Non-Formal Education (BNFE) have also acknowledged. Experts say that literacy (and numeracy) can be attained in two ways – formal education and adult literacy programmes – but the country's focus has largely been on formal education.

At the five districts, as a report by *The Daily Star* reveals, lack or absence of adult literacy programmes has been a constant factor. In Jamalpur, for example, only two of its five upazilas have out-of-school-children programmes run by BNFE, which is responsible for providing education and opportunities to individuals who have not received formal education. Such projects, if properly and regularly undertaken, as well as awareness among ordinary people can hugely help districts falling behind in literacy. But free education is not much of an incentive if the spectre of poverty looms continuously overhead, so authorities also need to focus on giving out-of-school children and adults financial support to boost their morale.

In the end, however, even that may not be enough. We need a whole-of-society approach to literacy attainment, with the involvement of households, social institutions, political leaders, policymakers and private actors. Crucially, we need the education budget to match the demand. We need proper planning and execution. And given the short window of time before the 2030 deadline, we need a master plan to direct and expedite all efforts. Ending illiteracy is itself a huge challenge; the government shouldn't compound it by allowing literacy inequality to get in the way.

Why this lukewarm response to dengue?

Worsening dengue situation deserves proper response from authorities

We're quite alarmed by the inadequate response to the evolving threat of dengue infections. The dengue situation seems to be getting worse, with September seeing the deaths of 34 patients and 9,911 hospitalisations. And, in the first three days of October, six people reportedly died. Of course, as reports have pointed out, these numbers do not reflect the whole dengue situation as they only account for hospitalised cases. More worryingly, experts have pointed out how the weather this month would be favourable to the breeding of Aedes larvae, meaning things could get even worse before they get better.

By now, dengue cases have been reportedly detected in at least 50 districts, with Dhaka and Cox's Bazar being the worst affected. Everything seems to be happening as forewarned by experts. In May, we also voiced our concerns over an impending dengue outbreak. We still remember the dismal dengue situation last year. So why does it seem like the government has no inkling of what's happening or no idea of how to contain the situation? Why is it still unable to effectively monitor and control the spread of dengue?

This is all the more troubling given that the DGHS conducts three mosquito surveys annually – pre-monsoon, monsoon-time, and post-monsoon. In its pre-monsoon survey this year, it had discovered Aedes mosquito larvae at 69 under-construction structures in South Dhaka alone. The survey also revealed that the density of the larvae per area was higher than it was in the last two years. So why, then, are the authorities failing to manage these sites adequately? The same question can be asked of all other risky sites in other areas. Reportedly, the authorities are neither properly identifying risky areas, nor collecting the addresses of dengue patients to monitor their homes and surroundings. This is totally unacceptable. We have already seen the consequences of such lukewarm response to a public health threat.

The government still seems to be “taking it slow” – too slow, one can argue, for our own good. It has been also resistant to experts who offered their suggestions. In 2017 and 2019, two experts from the WHO reportedly sought to direct the health ministry's actions in this regard, and even formulated a research-based mid-term plan on how dengue and Chikungunya could be prevented and controlled. Nothing happened after that.

We urge the authorities, including city corporations and local government bodies, to take the deteriorating dengue situation with due seriousness. Risky areas and known dengue hotspots must be thoroughly and regularly cleaned. Preventive methods must be communicated to all households. It is also crucial that healthcare facilities across the country are given enough support and resources to handle the surge of incoming dengue patients. The public should not have to face this dangerous disease because of the indifference of authorities.

Can teachers be the pivot of change in education?



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Learning poverty is a concept put forward by the World Bank based on a simple metric of the proportion of 10-14-year-olds of a country who can read a simple story at Class 2 level in primary school. One might consider this to be too minimal an education goal. Two of my colleagues (John Richards and Shahidul Islam) and I tried to probe the causes of learning poverty in South Asia in our recent book *Political Economy of Education in South Asia: Fighting Poverty, Inequality and Exclusion*.

Surprisingly, around 2020, the majority of adolescents, including those completing primary schooling in South Asia, could not read a Class 2 text, with the exception of Sri Lanka with 15 percent non-readers. By this criterion, the learning poverty rate was 58 percent in Bangladesh, 56 percent in India, and 77 percent in Pakistan. The comparable rate was 18 percent in China. Unesco and the World Bank estimate that the Covid-19-induced setback in education may have pushed the learning poverty rate in low-income countries from over 50 percent to around 70 percent.

We found in most of South Asia (barring Sri Lanka and the Indian state of Kerala) poorly functioning schools, lack of resources for the numbers and quality of the teachers needed, and the political dynamics that failed to generate the right priorities and policies. An example of a rare ray of light was the priority to education by the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in Delhi.

A report by *The New York Times* titled “Clean Toilets, Inspired Teachers: How India's Capital Is Fixing Its Schools” noted that Arvind Kejriwal, the Delhi chief minister, committed billions of additional rupees to overhaul schools. His Education Minister Manish Sisodia called in top experts to design new curricula, while working with teachers, parents and students to improve classroom practices. A quarter million students moved from private to government schools and nearly 100 percent passed the school final examination in 2021, compared to 87 percent in 2012.

Bangladesh's Education Minister Dr Dipu Moni recently wrote in the *WhiteBoard* magazine of the country's “tremendous success in attaining its education goals... net primary enrolment in 2015 was nearly universal, at 98 percent, compared to 80 percent in 2000... Bangladesh has achieved what many developing countries have struggled to achieve: it has reached



The number of well-trained teachers at both primary and secondary levels needs to be increased significantly in Bangladesh.

FILE PHOTO: NAYEM SHAAN

near gender parity. Such gains have undoubtedly allowed Bangladesh to accumulate human capital. They have made it possible to create pathways out of poverty through numeracy, literacy and skill.”

This optimistic narrative is a partial story that has to be complemented by the learning poverty narrative noted above. Measures to cope with the challenge include recruiting a large number of teachers for primary and secondary schools, which have remained on hold for over two years due to the pandemic. Forty-five thousand new assistant teachers, for whom tests and interviews have been completed, are in the process of being placed in primary schools.

At the secondary level, there are 70,000 approved teacher's positions in non-government high schools that are vacant at this time. “Approved” means these teachers in non-government schools are eligible to be supported by government salary subsidy (through monthly pay order or MPO). We may recall that 93 percent of secondary schools in the country fall in this category. The Non-Government Teacher Registration and Certification Agency (NTRCA) plans to test and register new teachers followed by appointment of the registered teachers in schools, though a timetable is yet to be announced.

The recruitment underway or planned of the 115,000 teachers is

medium schools, which have sprung up even in small towns, and Qawmi madrasas, over which the government has no control. Their teaching staff is not bound by any professional regulatory standards. For the public system, while there are requirements of educational credentials and training, whether these are meaningful and effective in making a difference in teachers' performance and students' learning remain questionable.

To maintain a reasonable ratio of 30 students per teacher at the primary level and 15-20 at the secondary level, the number of teachers and other education personnel needs to be increased significantly, doubling in the next 10 years from the current total of about 1.5 million. But how can it be ensured that capable and well-motivated young people, who do not see it as just another job, are attracted to teaching as a profession? It is well-known that teaching at present is the last choice as an occupation.

A “concurrent” approach to teacher preparation in a four-year post-secondary programme, in contrast to the prevailing “sequential” approach mentioned above, is the standard practice in most high-performing countries. A continuum of professional development from initial identification of future teachers, enrolment in professional preparation, followed by professional support, applying performance standards and

educational change. The Transforming Education Summit at the UN in September noted that 69 million new and better prepared teachers would be needed to achieve the SDG of quality primary and secondary education for all by 2030.

The annual Yidan Prize, the most prestigious education award in the world with the current cash value of USD 3.9 million dollars each for education research and education development, was announced on September 29. The two winners this year, Linda Darling-Hammond, professor emeritus at Stanford University, and Yongxin Zhu, professor at Soochow University in China, have both devoted their lives' work to improving teachers' preparation and performance. Prof Darling-Hammond has been at the forefront of research on policy and practice to ensure that all students have well-prepared teachers and inclusive classrooms. Prof Zhu founded two decades ago the New Education Initiative (NEI), which has boosted motivation and skills of over 500,000 teachers and eight million students across China.

Reimagining education workers, teachers and the teaching profession as the pivot of educational change cannot wait.

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Russia, Iran, and the Perils of Post-Autocracy



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Sometimes a news cycle constitutes more than just noise. It provides a loud, uncanny signal about what may lie beyond the horizon. That happened this month, when a more hopeful, dangerous, and radically different geopolitics came into view. Within literally a few days of each other, we have witnessed the near-collapse of the Russian army in Ukraine and the humiliation of a regime in the streets of Iranian cities.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's soldiers revealed themselves to be little more than a mob on the move, having tortured and mistreated the civilians under their control; they abruptly abandoned their positions and literally ran away from advancing Ukrainian forces. Putin's fascist-trending national security state may be turning to ashes. His threat of nuclear war only reveals that autocratic regimes are at their most dangerous in the years before they expire.

As for Iran, the regime's disrepute

among its own subjects has been on full display, with massive protests engulfing dozens of cities and crowds demanding the end of the Islamic republic. The rage, spread by social media, was ignited by the death at the hands of the so-called morality police of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini, who had been detained for not properly wearing her hijab. But the fuel was decades of repression and corruption and a ruined economy.

The war in Ukraine has already changed European and indeed global geopolitics. But the end of Putin's regime would lead to far more incalculable shifts: the Russian Federation itself could break apart, while Nato and the European Union expand eastwards. Likewise, the fall of Iran's clerical regime would alter the entire Middle East, virtually ending the decades-old Sunni Shia sectarian war and vastly improving the strategic position of Israel and the conservative Arab states. Iraq might even stabilise as a result, to say nothing of Lebanon

and Syria.

Neither the Russian nor the Iranian regime is now specifically threatened. Each could hang on for years. But this month provided a glimpse of their eventual demise. Because Putin cannot win or even get a draw in Ukraine, and because the mullahs are openly despised among broad swaths of their own population, their downfall should be viewed as a question of when, not if. In a world where news of one military defeat, or one outrage, or one obscure and symbolic act can spread instantaneously on social media, men like Putin and Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei sleep uneasily.

But while these regimes have no real future, there is no clear and institutionally viable alternative to replace them, and that is where the geopolitical danger lies. After all, we are not talking about just any two countries. Russia is a nuclear-armed great power. Iran is the major pivot state of the Middle East and Central Asia, on the brink of becoming a nuclear power.

Even when democracy succeeds, it does not emerge overnight in states with no real tradition of it. Years of turmoil often ensue. The 1990s in Russia, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, were a period of rampant crime, economic chaos, and mismanaged reforms that left roughly 70 percent of Russians living at or below the poverty line. It was from this

maelstrom of dysfunctional democracy that Putin finally emerged.

Ironically, Iran went through much less of a painful, drawn-out political transition in 1979, because democracy was never the mullahs' goal. Instead, they quickly replaced the Shah's autocracy with clerical despotism. But the mullahs have so destroyed their society that a post-theocratic Iran could be ungovernable or even disintegrate along various ethnic and geographical lines.

That is why the democratic triumphalism that will accompany these regimes' downfall in the coming years will rapidly give way to the sobering recognition of an awesome political void in Moscow and Tehran, with perhaps more radical forces – Russian ultra-nationalists and Iranian Revolutionary Guards – waiting in the wings. The more destructive a tyranny has been, the more pervasive the subsequent anarchy often is.

In this chaotic world wrought by the end of tyranny, the search for order will predominate. Among intellectuals and policymakers, the fear of anarchy will replace the fear of autocracy. This is easier to imagine when one considers just how difficult it will be to stabilise the utterly broken states and societies that Putin and the mullahs will have left in their wake. The decline of autocracy will only make the work of democracy that much harder.